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Static Vortex

Victor Wolf

A storm moved in on Weatherford, flashing hundreds of times every minute and churning out a constant rumble of thunder. It was a warm May afternoon. Wallace Mikell and his six-year-old son, Rod, stood on their porch a mile east of town and watched the advancing supercell.

"Do you think I'll get struck?" Rod asked.

"By lightning?"

Rod nodded. He looked grave.

Probably not, Wallace thought.

"Certainly not," Wallace said. "Lightning takes the easiest path to the ground: tall things. That's why trees and telephone poles get hit so much."

He looked up at his house, hoping that the rogue electricity wouldn't think his whirling attic turbine was the easiest path possible. The place was somewhat dilapidated—needed new paint and shutters, not to mention the property itself hadn't been maintained (let alone farmed) for twenty-eight years.

"But lightning hits people, too."

"Sometimes, but not when they're safe under a porch. We'd better get inside anyway. It's gonna pour soon."

Mary Mikell was in the kitchen cooking dinner: mashed potatoes and a crock-pot chicken that had been simmering all day. Rod ran up to his room to his Legos, and Wallace walked into the warm kitchen.

"I'm really worried about this one," he said.

"The storm?"

"Yeah. There's a strong cool front. That's never good."

Mary hugged him. "It's fine, honey. How many thunderstorms pelt our house each year?"

"A lot."

"So calm down," she said, kissing him on the cheek.

Wallace retreated back to the living room and turned on the weather radio. His fears weren't pacified as easily as Rod's. There was a change in air pressure outside, the kind that had made Wallace's stomach hurt with worry for as long as he could remember. So he sat and listened to the weather radio's mechanical voice.

"...chance of up to quarter-sized hail. Violent thunderstorms are capable of producing tornadoes without warning..."

After a few minutes of robot chatter, the lights flickered and went out.

"Of all the days to use the crock-pot when we have a damn gas stove," yelled Mary from the kitchen.

The comforting hum of the central heat and air was gone, and the radio's battery was dead, leaving only the wind, rain, and thunder. Mary lit a candle and quietly cursed the power company. Rod carefully creaked down the stairs, guided by the little flashlight that he used for reading in bed.

Since dinner and TV were both on the fritz, they all went outside to watch the show, sinking into ancient wicker chairs that Wallace's father had built.

The jagged streaks of lightning blasting the prairie were the primary source of light. The storm was almost upon them, and the flashes allowed glimpses of low-hanging tails in the cloud.

"I think we'd better get in the cellar," Wallace said, and no one argued. This one was a monster.

Rod guided the family down the stairs with his flashlight. Wallace told him to turn it off to conserve the battery, and the damp cellar went black. The din of the wind and thunder grew louder still.

Straight winds, please let it just be really strong straight winds. But in no time, there was a roaring train sound that grew louder still, until it mocked a jet engine. Safe in the musty cellar, the Mikell family prayed that their house would still exist when silence came.

Wallace had never heard any wind so hellishly loud, but it had to be straight winds; there was no other explanation for it. The wind had been roaring, shrieking, for twenty minutes.

Wallace held up a hand to his frightened wife and son and cracked open the cellar door. A little over a mile away a black screaming vortex was in the grassy fields where his grandfather had once grown wheat. A monstrous, beautiful tornado twisted into the dirt. It was a stovepipe: vertical edges of black cloud reached up into the storm. It was locked in place.

They had been in the cellar for over an hour. Wallace peeked again, even though he knew from the sound that the tornado would still be there.

As if it were Wallace's fault that the tornado remained, Mary said, "I don't want to sleep down here."

"I don't wanna stay down here, either," said Rod.

Another forty minutes went by. Wallace cracked the cellar door open again, judging the distance to the house.

"We're trapped," said Mary. She was hysterical, and they were all dehydrated.

"It's not moving. You two stay here. I'll make a break for the house and grab some bottled waters and snacks, and then I'll come back to the cellar. The twister looks like it's too far north to hit the house even if it *were* moving."

"Are you crazy? We should just wait it out."

But Wallace was determined. And besides, it really *did* look too far north. He kissed her on the head.

"I'll be right back."

He was soaked before he made it twenty feet and was worried about the frequent lightning, but adrenaline had taken over. The roar was deafening outside and barely tolerable once he closed the front door of the house.

He threw his suitcase open and piled dry clothes into it, then sprinted into Rod's room and did the same. The adrenaline was wearing off, and the roaring seemed to be getting louder, as if the monster outside was coming for him. He grabbed his wallet and keys from the top of the dresser and went back into the thick of the storm.

Wallace kept checking on the storm over the next few hours, each time coming back down the stone cellar stairs slowly shaking his head. Not that anyone was really hopeful that it'd be gone; the roar was omnipresent.

Eventually, they all fell asleep. The cellar was furnished with an old wooden bench that couldn't fit them all, so Wallace slept slumped against the concrete wall.

The tornado endured when the Mikells woke up. They were sore all over.

"What do you think it *is*?" Mary asked.

"Probably just a freak of nature. One in a trillion thing, you know," Wallace said, but he wasn't sure he believed it.

When the tornado still hadn't moved by late morning, Mary was fed up. "Let's get out of here," she said. "We'll sprint to the truck: you can carry Rod. We need to go to a hotel. You said yourself it's too far north, right?"

Wallace didn't like leaving, but the ache in his back urged him on.

They got stuck in the mud only once; the dirt roads closer to town were bone dry. There were only two hotels in Weatherford: the ever-shady Rayfield Inn and a shabby (but passable) Best Western. They headed to the latter and entered the lobby.

"Y'all are soaked!" said the twenty-something working the desk. He glanced over their shoulders. "Is it raining out?" he asked, although he could see plainly that it wasn't.

"No," said Wallace, "Not around here."

Wallace awoke to the sound of a news broadcast. He sat up in bed and saw that his wife and son were already up, watching a weatherman who stood at the edge of a violent storm. In the distance behind him were the Mikell house and, farther back, the tornado. It was impossible, but behind the talking head on the Sanyo, there it was. The spinning cloud was persistence personified.

"...never seen anything like it, Ted. Top meteorologists are studying the phenomenon on Doppler and will soon be on site..."

"Oh my God," said Wallace, causing Mary and Rod to jump.

"Oh, you're up," said Mary. "Let's go down and get some breakfast. It's complimentary." She said all of this cheerily but then began to cry. Rod started to cry, too. Wallace edged out of bed to hug them.

After he comforted Mary and Rod, they went downstairs for breakfast, and it exceeded expectations. Or maybe they were just starving. They stuffed themselves before retiring to the lounge.

Rod was tracing patterns on the wallpaper absently with his finger, and Wallace felt sure his son would have worry lines before he was twenty.

Mary looked at Wallace. "So what now?" There was more color in her cheeks after the meal, but she was still haggard.

"I don't know, exactly. I think we should go back home and check on things at least," Wallace said, shrugging.

"I'm not going back, especially with Rod. It's so damn loud and dark out there. I don't think you should either."

"Our house isn't 'out there,'" he said. "It's home."

"Doesn't much feel like home with a deadly storm camped out on top of it," Mary said.

Wallace ignored her. "It'll be fine. I'll make sure everything's turned off in case the power comes back on and get us some more clothes. We hardly brought anything with us." It was 10:00 AM, and he already felt exhausted.

"All right. Be quick for Christsakes. If you think that thing's gonna move, you'd better move first. I love you, and be *careful*."

The road near the house was sludge, so Wallace stopped at the storm's edge and walked the remaining mile.

He stood on the porch for a while and just watched the tornado. He'd always been fascinated yet terrified by them as a kid. The thing was beautiful, but its influence on him hadn't diminished over the years. It felt more and more like some living entity. The howling jet-engine sound of it was abominable.

Why the hell was it still here?

Wallace was methodical in gathering more clothes and checking that all the appliances were turned off. The power was still out, and he operated clumsily by lightning flashes, until he located a flashlight. Once he had everything, he marched back to his truck.

Two more nights in the hotel, and the storm was still raging in the same spot. Wallace was sure that everything had been an insane dream for the first few seconds every morning.

He was growing anxious as they watched the news; the National Guard created a mile-wide perimeter around the tornado, and a crowd began to form. At first it was mostly meteorologists, but eventually there were more citizens than scientists. No tourists had yet arrived on the scene. Wallace figured they would soon enough.

Wallace was frightened, too, that someone would vandalize their house or it would burn down in a fire started by lightning. Mary didn't share in his fears; she was already toying with the idea of moving, maybe to a suburb out of state. Rod was bored; Wallace had only retrieved a couple of toys for him.

After watching more and more footage of his own property from a hotel room, his thoughts of vandals grew to obsession.

"You wanna know what I think?" he asked his wife on the fourth night, after having a few too many drinks. Rod was in the adjacent lobby playing with Legos that the manager had brought for him.

"Hmm?"

"I think we need to go back home. Someone could break into the house and burn it down or something."

"Wallace, there's a damn *tornado* barely a mile away!"

"Well I want to go back."

"With that thing out there? And with our six-year old? Are you crazy?"

"I went before, and it was fine."

"Yeah," said Mary, "you went, and I was crazy with worry and regretted the hell out of letting you! I don't know what I was thinking."

"People could be breaking in, stealing. I earned that land, working on the farm. Not James. He was always bitter that I got the house when Mom and Dad died."

"What does all *that* have to do with it? It was ten years ago. You're rambling."

"It's *my* land, that's what it has to do with it. So I want to be there, freak storm or not."

"You're drunk, Wallace. It's not safe," she concluded. "Especially not for Rod. Speaking of Rod, could you watch him while I pee?"

"Whatever." Wallace walked out of the bar.

"Hey, Dad. Look what I built."

"That's great, Son."

He ruffled Rod's hair and stumbled a little.

"Have I ever told you about why we live on the farm instead of in a city?"

"No," said Rod.

"Because I earned the farm for us. I stayed and worked when Grandma and Grandpa were still alive, and your uncle left when he was fourteen," said Wallace. He was drunker than he had thought. "In other words, we got it 'cause of *hard work*. Discipline is very important."

"OK, Dad," said Rod. He went back to his Legos, and Wallace passed out on the lobby couch.

The next morning Wallace's cell phone woke him up. He didn't recognize the number.

"Mr. Mikell?"

"Huh?" said Wallace. He had no business talking without drinking some water first; his throat had been drenched with beer and left to sit all night.

"This is Barney Gillin, with the National Weather Service."

"Oh, OK," said Wallace, rubbing his eyes.

"We have concluded that your house is not in the path of the tornado, should it even move. The northern part of town however, is another story, and there is debate about whether to evacuate or—"

"We can go home? It's safe?"

"Yes, Mr. Mikell, we're sure. It's way too far north."

"That's what I said."

"We're baffled that the storm has sustained itself this long, and we suspect it'll dissipate soon. I assure you we are—"

He hung up on Gillin and rushed down to the lobby to tell Mary the good news.

She didn't take it well.

"I don't care what they say! I told you last night, it's not safe. That's final." With that, she announced that she was going to have a shower.

Wallace was pissed and groggy. He went to get water and breakfast without another word to Mary, and by the time he'd finished his dry Texas toast, his mind was made up. He went upstairs to hug Rod goodbye (Mary was still toweling off) and drove out to his farmhouse.

The dirt roads that had been merely soaked were now impassable. Wallace was sure that given a few more weeks they'd start silting over. Or turn into a swamp. There were cars lining the dry stretch of road, and the grass path towards the tornado was stamped down. The rain came and went. Lightning was as prevalent as ever.

Halfway to his house from the truck, Wallace broke into a run. He was afraid that whatever vandals may be inside would get away, unpunished.

He made a full sweep and ignored the roaring of the storm. No one was (or had been) in the house. Wallace stepped out onto his porch, relieved, and watched the tornado and its audience. Incredibly, there was a pile of plastic-wrapped newspapers outside the front door.

His phone rang, and the caller ID read "Mary." Wallace ignored it. He would stay here and hold down the fort. He could explain it to her tomorrow after she calmed down.

The screaming wind was irrelevant when he lay down for the night; it was so nice to be in his own bed again.

In the morning, Wallace made some breakfast from canned goods and went outside to watch the crowd and the storm for a while. He had decided to call Mary in the early afternoon.

At one point, the tornado lifted slightly, thinning and twisting dangerously towards the crowd. Wallace sat up straight, praying for its departure, but it came back down as thick and stationary as if it had never moved.

Thirty minutes after Wallace sat down, a lone figure approached him. The visitor was short and chubby, wearing a corduroy suit, clutching his hat with one hand and a briefcase with the other. The man yelled something that was indecipherable over the wind, and Wallace invited him inside.

"Hello, Mr. Mikell. My name is Terrance Chornutte." Chornutte smelled like tobacco and had a voice like a torn sub-woofer under a cup of wet gravel. He held out a pudgy hand.

"Wallace."

"Wallace, then. Wallace, I'm here representing Drantch Corporation. We own a quarter of the theme parks in the country, and we are expanding."

"Oh?" His phone vibrated, but he ignored it. "Go on."

"I'll cut to the chase because that damn howling gives me a headache.



Drantch has toyed with the idea of educational theme parks at historical locations with little exhibits to keep the parents occupied. We think it will raise revenue, and the kids will still have their rides. Tornado tilt-o-whirls, a water park, you name it..."

Wallace didn't think he was cutting to the chase at all. "And?"

Chornutte chuckled a reedy, wet chuckle.

"We are very interested in your property, Mr. Mikell."

Wallace's stomach lurched. Chornutte could be talking a lot of money. After a time (Chornutte waited patiently, smiling), Wallace asked what the offer was. The fat man pulled a check out of his inside pocket and held it up next to his face, like he was posing for a picture.

The amount was considerable.

"I'll, uhh, need to talk this over with Mary, my wife. And I guess with my son too, but he's six."

"Sure, pal, sure. When can you let me know?" He handed over his card as he said this.

"Tomorrow, maybe the next day."

"Take your time. We know the storm won't be here much longer, but we're interested just the same. Historical sites." He winked and was gone.

Wallace followed him outside and stood out on the porch, staring into the black vortex. There was a decent-sized crowd around it, the updraft of wind sucking at their clothes, pulling them frightfully towards the black column.

Two of the spectators, a man and a woman, were having a yelling match. Wallace could almost hear their screaming above the wind. Most of the crowd had taken to watching the couple, despite the tornado towering over them. When the argument seemed to come to a standstill, the woman turned away from the man, her face in her hands.

The man then took one last look up at the great spinning cloud and sprinted over the barricade like he was leaping a hurdle in a race. The wind viciously yanked him up and thrashed him around three times like a marionette before throwing him out of sight.

"God!" whispered Wallace, and he called 911.

The sobbing woman, wailing ambulance, frightened crowd, and walk back to his truck were already a blur in Wallace's mind as he drove back to the hotel.

Mary was still pissed. He let her chew him out for a while; he felt bad about leaving without saying anything. After she calmed down, she hugged him.

"I'm sorry, honey," Wallace said.

He wanted to wait until things cooled off to bring up Chornutte, but his willpower gave out after ten seconds.

"We have something to talk about, dear," he said.

"What now?"

Wallace told her about the offer.

Mary looked dazed. "...How, uh, much?"

Wallace told her again. Mary sat down, her expression blank and body rigid.

"We can't pass this up. We can move to a city, get better jobs. We'll make so much more money teaching in Oregon or Maine or something!"

"Breathe, Mary. Slow down; I want to talk about this."

"Wallace, there isn't much to talk about. You know I've always wanted to live in a city, that's what we've been saving up for, besides Rod's college. I know you love that place, but are you really content to stay there until we die? We don't even use the

land. We have forty acres just rotting. This damn tornado thing could be a blessing!"

"I love it there. It's home," he said.

Mary took in a deep breath and sighed. They decided to let the idea sit for a night, have a nice dinner, and spend some time with Rod, as a family, without discussing their leave of absence from home.

Dinner was good, but Wallace and Mary were both forcing laughter. Each knew what the other wanted.

In the morning, they were up before Rod. There was a coffee maker in the room, but the complimentary coffee that came with it tasted like dirt. Mary brewed some anyway.

"Well?" she said.

"I want to stay."

Mary sipped the disgusting coffee, trembling slightly.

"Did you ever think of me when you decided that?"

"Yes, but—"

"It's so much money, Wallace! Come on!" she said.

"Keep your voice down; you'll wake Rod up. I know how much it is. I won't leave."

"Then maybe Rod and I will."

Wallace was stunned. Later he would wish that he had tried to calm her down, but he didn't; he went on the defensive.

"Maybe Rod wants to stay with me and not you," he said.

"Yeah, with a freaking tornado in the backyard. Let's see how the court rules."

Wallace was shocked. He stared straight ahead, unable to think of anything to say through so much indignation.

"So what are you going to tell this Chonet guy?" she said.

"It's pronounced 'Shore-nute'," said Wallace, and entered the number from Chornutte's card into his cell.

"I said, what are you going to tell him?" she said.

"We're not interested," Wallace said into the phone.

"Wallace, please!" said Mary

"I said, no!" said Wallace, and he hung up.

Mary started to cry. "Why would you do this to us?"

"Me? You'd uproot us from our home for some cash at the blink of an eye!"

"You're so damn selfish," she said.

Wallace stormed out of the room, slamming the door, and Rod woke with a start and began to cry.

It was the kind of conversation you couldn't take back.

Wallace drove back to the house to sleep. The next morning, he grabbed the newspaper on top of the pile to pass the time. It read:

"Dramatic Suicide at 'Static Tornado.'"

"At about 4:00 PM yesterday, Weatherford resident Arnold Jordanson committed suicide by jumping into what meteorologists have dubbed 'The Static Tornado.' The man's girlfriend, Vicky Slinger, said that Jordanson was convinced that the tornado 'was God,' and that he must 'meet his creator.'"

This incident has convinced Franklin Francesco, pastor of the First Baptist Church, that the tornado is in fact 'The Devil' and is 'warping and twisting the minds of the innocent as it twists itself.' He informed *The Chronicle* that he would begin a protest against the storm 'ASAP.'

Meanwhile, meteorologist Brian Stout says that he is ‘...currently unsure why the thunderstorm and tornado remain in place. It’s not unheard of for a smaller type of tornado called a landspout to become stationary, but we’ve obviously never seen anything stay put near this long... On the Doppler, it just looks like any ordinary heavy thunderstorm. It’s just not moving.’”

Wallace stopped reading, and, sure enough, the preacher from the article was outside riling up the crowd, screaming through a megaphone. Bitterness washed over Wallace: at the preacher, at the idiots crowded around the storm risking lightning strikes, and at Mary. The worst was knowing that she wasn’t entirely wrong. How much of his attachment to his land was born out of spite toward his brother?

He walked into the empty living room and listened to the howling wind. He loved the drafty house: the wood paneling, the shoddy wiring that he had to fix annually, the heavy oak doors, the garish green paint coating the counters. There *was* pride and anger at his brother, too. But it was his home where he had raised his family.

And she had the nerve to call me selfish.

His phone vibrated. Bad timing.

“Wallace?”

“What?”

“Please call that man back; ask him for time to reconsider. Please. Think about Rod growing up in this crappy town just like we did. We hated high school, and—”

“And everyone hates high school! So what? You’re not thinking about Rod; you’re thinking about yourself!”

“Excuse me, but that’s what you’re doing! We barely talked at all about it before you called that guy on some impulse and turned him down! You’re acting crazy!”

“No, I’m not!” he said, his voice rising in pitch and volume.

“Wallace, I wasn’t bluffing when I said we’d leave. I’m about to go and file for divorce.”

“File for divorce then, bitch!” he yelled.

Then he threw the phone across the room and screamed, and the wind harmonized.

He picked up his phone an hour later after calming down. She had caught him in a rage, and now that he was down from it he was terrified of losing her. He hadn’t meant any of it. There was a text message from Mary:

“Taking Rod to Mom’s.”

He called her, but she didn’t pick up.

Wallace decided it would be best for them to let each other cool off. The storm would leave soon, and she would come back.

After a week, he received divorce papers in the mail. They had talked for hours, and her mind was made up. They settled on Mary keeping Rod during the school year (she was moving too far away for a weekend trade-off), and Wallace would get him in the summers.

After a few more days, the storm finally dissipated. It took about thirty minutes. The lightning stopped. The tornado became wispy and retracted into the cloud, and

then it was gone. It left behind a heinous spiral of dirt a third of a mile wide stripped totally bare and a hell of a lot of mud.

Meteorologists were in furious debate. Most people forgot about the phenomenon as quickly as their short attention spans gave out with no new footage. Those who did talk about it (and weren't scientists) mostly fell into three camps: it was aliens; it was God; it was unprecedented Nature, never to be repeated.

Wallace missed the storm. It had left him with profound guilt, loss, and insomnia; the sporadic creaking of the old house kept him from sleep.



Myer Moore